

May 2020

From the Desk of the President

None of us could have imagined the world that we are living in today from the world we left only a few short months ago in February. Before March 1st, few of us ever heard the term “social-distancing” or “PPE” or the deadly and life-changing **COVID-19**? For the sake of the communal good, we have been forced to live isolated behind our front doors only to venture out for essential goods and/or services. For many of us the trip to see grandparents or elderly family members has now turned into a visit through a windowpane or over Skype, Zoom, or one of the dozen or so other social media platforms.

The Talbot County Council enacted its first Emergency Declaration on March 16th in coordination with Governor Hogan’s Emergency and Catastrophic Health Declaration on March 5th, both in response to the **coronavirus pandemic**, which first ravaged parts of Asia and Europe and is now like a tidal-wave crippling one U.S city after another. In order to slow the spread of the coronavirus, “non-essential” businesses were ordered to close resulting in staggering unemployment numbers, the mandatory wearing of “face masks” in public places, and drive-up **COVID-19** testing sites popping up in vacant parking lots across the state, including the one at Chesapeake College serving the Mid-Shore counties.

Testing for the coronavirus is an important tool in our fight against the spread of the disease. Having enough testing elements has been a major problem forcing many state governments to eagerly search for suppliers to fill their needs. Locally, Choptank Community Health System has tested over 900 citizens at their locations. Additionally, Shore Regional Health has completed its share of testing as well as assisting in the coordination of the regional medical surge response. Several local physicians have stepped up to do their part of the testing and should likewise be commended for their efforts.

On the front line is the real battle: doctors, and nurses and medical technicians have come face to face with this fierce enemy, which has claimed the lives of over 1,500 Marylanders and has placed over 6,000 in intensive care. The coronavirus has taken more Americans in five months (over 71,000) than were lost in the 20 years of the Vietnam War. Many of these front-line heroes have faced long hours, dwindling supplies, being quarantined from their families, and left to hold the hands of dying patients separated from family and loved ones.

The Council’s Emergency Declaration also activated the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). In a coordinated effort at the direction of the Governor’s executive order, Clay Stamp, Director of Emergency Services and Assistant County Manager partnered with Dr. Fredia Wadley, Talbot County Health Officer, to quickly assemble a team of highly-skilled professionals to oversee the County’s response, as well as work with municipal governments and essential businesses to operate safely.

Part of the EOC plan is the County's response to feeding hungry families and sheltering the children of essential employees. There are too many people to name who have been working behind the scenes; including hundreds of volunteers helping with food distribution efforts, sheltering operations, mental health needs, law enforcement, business sector operations, and assisting with communication to the immigrant community. From sewing masks for health care workers to making hand sanitizer, Talbot County citizens have stepped up to help others in an amazing demonstration of charity.

While the Council's emergency declaration closed county buildings to the public, a minimum workforce has been steadily on the job to serve the people of Talbot County. Mission-critical employees such as 911 operators, emergency services professionals, detention center officers, and county roads and public works staff have continued to operate. Easton Airport continues to receive flights and the permits and inspections department has stayed operational to help our economy by allowing for local construction projects to proceed without any additional delay.

The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) team has many dedicated people working behind the scenes including Jan Willis, Local Care Team Coordinator; Childlene Brooks, Brookletts Place – Talbot Senior Center; Marilyn Neal, Neighborhood Service Center; and Talbot County Public Schools (TCPS) Superintendent Dr. Kelly Griffith, working to secure and distribute food. Derek White, YMCA of the Chesapeake, and Dr. Wadley are working on sheltering operations to ensure safe child-care. Cassandra Vanhooser, Director, Talbot County Economic Development & Tourism has been working with our business sector and providing daily public information briefs. EPD Officer Eric Kellner has been leading our law enforcement team. Linda Webb, Director of Talbot County DSS, is leading the Human Services Individual Assistance team to oversee the CARES funding. Shore Regional Health President and CEO Ken Kozel and Dr. Wadley are coordinating the medical surge planning and capacity.

We also want to thank those employees of essential businesses for their efforts; monitoring customers coming into their stores, ensuring customers are wearing appropriate masks and making sure their stores are safe for all of us to shop.

Despite the pandemic, your County government is continuing to operate and provide services, including finalizing the County Budget. On April 14th, the County's FY21 budget was introduced and public hearings have been held. The budget, as introduced, is \$96,550,000 and retains the FY20 funding level for all County departments and agencies, except for State mandated increases for TCPS and County debt service. The FY21 budget has no change in the number of full-time County employees and does not include salary increases for employees. The Council is cognizant of the impact the **COVID-19** pandemic is having on our citizens and as a result, the FY21 budget has no increases in either Real Property or Income Tax rates.

The FY21 budget is funded, in part, with revenues of \$6.7 million from prior year fund balance. Due to continuing economic uncertainties, as a result of the **COVID-19** pandemic, the FY21 budget includes an unprecedented reserve for contingencies of \$2.4 million and places all

proposed equipment purchases in the County Manager's budget to allow for significant Council oversight.

Talbot County Public Schools is funded at the State-mandated Maintenance of Effort level, which provides for an additional \$1.5 million of operating funds, as well as \$4.4 million in debt service. Debt service has increased by \$600,000 from FY20 to pay for the full year of debt service on the new Easton Elementary School. The County's share of the total project cost of \$50 million is \$30 million. The Council is pleased to include funding in the FY21 budget for several capital projects at Talbot County Public Schools including the replacement of the Easton High School track; Easton High School parking lot resurfacing; St. Michaels High School parking lot resurfacing; St. Michaels High School security cameras; and White Marsh Elementary School telephone/PA system replacement.

The Council's final budget work session will be held on Tuesday, May 12th with the Council voting on the budget on Tuesday, May 19th.

As we begin to follow the Governor's plan for re-opening Maryland, we will need the cooperation and support of everyone if we are to be successful. Talbot County Health Officer Dr. Wadley said it best, "The threat from **COVID-19** will still be present, but it is clear that we must find a way to balance health and safety with the economic realities of job loss and a wounded economy."

We are sad to say good-bye to Mary O'Donnell, Assistant County Attorney, who is leaving us to accept the Magistrate's position in the Dorchester County judicial system. Mary has served Talbot County for three years and we have appreciated her wise counsel during her time of service and congratulate her on this exciting opportunity.

Finally, high school graduations are just around the corner. We applaud Talbot County Superintendent Dr. Griffith and her team for their innovative recognition for our Talbot County Public School graduates at a time when our traditional graduation ceremonies must be curtailed. We hope the friends and family members of the seniors from Easton High School, St. Michaels High School, and Saints Peter and Paul High School will participate in the efforts being made to help these graduates celebrate their commitments to college, career, or the military in the coming days.

"We will get through this, together!"

Corey Pack, President
Talbot County Council